



# Shoestring PR

JMM Communications director **Julie Morgan** looks at the options for homegrown PR campaigns

**M**arketing and PR are key elements of any business plan but traditionally the costs of hiring an agency have kept “start-ups” and small business operators out of the game. The good news is that now those with a shoe-string budget for marketing and promotions can play.

A free plug on the radio or a good write up in the paper can be invaluable. But hiring a PR agency to promote you may not always be practical or affordable.

## WHAT IS PR?

Public relations is the art of generating free publicity for your business. Until recently, it's been a role carried out by experienced media professionals or PR agencies who have got media exposure through timely campaigns, events and stunts for clients with a substantial budget.

However, with the advent new online DIY publicity services there are now limitless opportunities. The business value of good publicity is priceless and anyone with a small budget for marketing can do it.

PR can be incredibly valuable when growing your business. Whether you're targeting consumers, businesses or looking for investors, having your news appear in the media helps to build your brand and credibility.

There's nothing more powerful than word of mouth, and media coverage can help kick-start that.

When you do the sums, comparing the costs of advertising and PR, particularly for start-ups, it's a no-brainer. Because,

unlike advertising, which is paying to be promoted, PR aims to generate free editorial publicity.

But there are some downsides.

There is no guarantee that you will get media coverage – you have to win the journalist's interest, based on the merit of your story. You also don't have any control over what is written and you rarely get to approve any content before it's made public.

## INCREASE YOUR CHANCES

For those who want to do their own PR, success comes down to having a good story, having the right tools, understanding the media and how to reach them – it's about picking out what's newsworthy in your business, and promoting that. Generally, if what you're doing is new, unique, an Australian first, timely, controversial or quirky you have a good chance of gaining some media interest in your story.

According to DIY publicist and founder of Australia's largest online babysitter directory, Delia Timms, PR was crucial to establishing findababysitter.com.au, and then selling it to Fairfax Digital.

“For an online business, that introduces parents to babysitters and nannies, credibility is paramount and our PR efforts helped to achieve that,” Timms said.

“In the early days I had the time, the motivation and some basic skills to do some of my own PR. I was lucky that the ‘childcare shortage’ was a hot topic in the media and so I gained some good coverage based on this.”

What sets good PR apart?



According to Timms, the first step is to have a genuine interest in your business area and be involved in that industry.

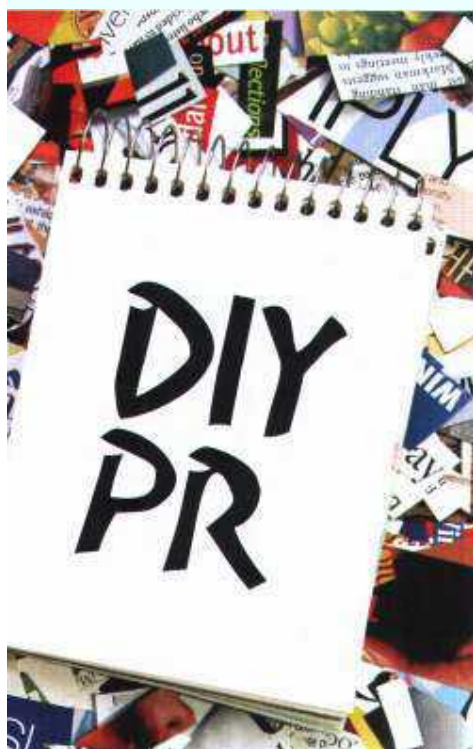
“I was really passionate about the childcare topic and was personally in the thick of it with two kids under two. It also helps to provide an exceptionally good product or service. Your customers will love it and talk about it – sometimes on TV!

“Then the next step is to gain some quality advice whether that is from websites, professionals and books, write up a plan, implement it and monitor it”.

Timms says she still remembers the impact of a good news story.

“A customer asked if she could mention our website in her interview on Channel 9's *Mornings with Kerri-Anne*. Our URL appeared on the TV screen and within minutes, we had thousands of visitors and the site crashed due to unexpected traffic! We didn't convert many customers that day, but we know that piece of coverage spread the word. We also put the segment on our 'media' page online, so it was brilliant for credibility, too.”

Timms warned that you may make mistakes along the way.



"I did try a 'gimmicky' campaign when we launched our "SMS a sitter" functionality. I posted about 20 toy mobile phones with lollies in them to journalists with a media release," she recalled.

"We didn't get any coverage from this. I think it was too gimmicky and not authentic enough and I'd recommend sticking to your honest message with useful, interesting or valuable news".

Does PR replace advertising or other marketing initiatives?

The textbook answer to this question would be no. The more often your customers see your business promoted through a range of channels, the better for building your brand recognition. Timms said for her the PR complemented other efforts that focused on sales.

"PR alone didn't necessarily drive and convert customers. But it did increase brand awareness, build our credibility and spread the word," she said.

"We used a mix of strategies, including PR and paid ads in print and online. Both were important for building the business. Word-of-mouth referrals were really powerful and I believe some of this was a result of PR." **W**

## THREE STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY DOING YOUR OWN PR

### Step 1) Make sure your story is newsworthy

News is something exciting that's "in the now" not something that happened a week or month ago. In business it could be:

- a launch of a new product or service – particularly if it's unique to the Australian/ international market
- new contract/deal/export achievement/partner
- record turnover or sales
- a business milestone e.g. celebrating 20 years in business
- new research report or statistics
- comment on a current news story or trend

If there's no story to tell, a straight profile on your business or product won't get you in the news. The same thing goes for sponsorships or advertising unless they are controversial or perhaps feature a celebrity.

### Step 2) Have a well written press release

Journalists receive hundreds of emails a day from people wanting coverage and a well written press release can certainly help your news get noticed.

Make sure you:

- use a catchy, informative headline
- your first paragraph needs to capture the essence of your story and contain the key facts – what, why, how, when and where
- keep the language simple
- keep sentences short and don't waffle on. Journalists want the key facts fast
- ideally don't have more than two sentences to a paragraph.

### Step 3) Send your press release to the right contacts

There's no point sharing your arts news with the sports editor – so make sure you send your release to the most appropriate media contacts. Be sure you don't miss a great opportunity to get your media release read by having out of date contact information. Do your homework and if there's a section of the paper or a magazine that's more relevant to you, target them.

If you're looking to buy a media list online, shop around. Most provide you with bulk lists of media information and prices can vary a lot, but if you need you can obtain a specific list – say arts, business, food, lifestyle, tourism, news or regional editors.

## DOING IT YOURSELF – PROS AND CONS

### Pros:

- No agency fees or monthly retainers
- You build relationships with the media so you can go back to them again
- Editorial is considered more credible than advertising, and it's considerably more cost effective
- You can respond to journalists directly and quickly – media deadlines are often tight. Being able to provide comment or information on the spot can help boost your chances of media coverage

### Cons:

- If PR is new to you, you may need to learn some basics of when to contact the media, what the media are looking for and how to maximise an interview. Good books can help demystify the process
- Writing press releases and contacting journalists can be time-consuming without the right tools, so make sure you have the right media contact lists and out-source your press release writing if putting pen to paper isn't your strength